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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 UNVIE VIENNA 000553

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN AMBASSADOR TO IRAN DESCRIBES ELECTIONS AS
DRIVING TEHRAN ENVIRONMENT

REF: UNVIE 544

Classified By: DCM Geoff Pyatt for reasons 1.4 (c) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary. On December 3, former Austrian Ambassador to Tehran Michael Postl (please protect) debriefed MsnOff on his final calls on Iranian officials as he left post. He noted that former Presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani both had extracted themselves from the normal political scene and were focused on tangential issues where their weight could still be felt. Nevertheless, Rafsanjani suggested that it would be helpful if the West spoke out against the election fraud and human rights violations that followed.

¶2. (C) Postl said that President Ahmadinejad's chief of cabinet, Mashaie, made clear to him prior to the Geneva talks that Iran was planning to approach the talks with a spirit of compromise and that Postl would be "surprised" by Iran's attitude. Postl explained the lack of follow-through in the wake of the talks as a probable decision by Supreme Leader Khamenei that the West was not trustworthy or that Iran could get more from the P5 plus 1 than the six offered in Geneva. Majles Speaker Larijani's outspoken disapproval of the Tehran Research Reactor deal advocated by Ahmadinejad could have been an exercise of Larijani's first opportunity to undermine Ahmadinejad after he was pressured to disavow himself of knowledge that Iranian prisoners were being raped in jail, which lost him credibility with the Iranian public. Finally, Postl argued that the U.S. should focus its outreach to Iran on formats that Iranians perceive are less biased, such as BBC Persian's version of Hardtalk or Press TV. End Summary.

¶3. (C) On December 3, former Austrian Ambassador to Tehran Michael Postl gave MsnOff a readout of the state of domestic political wranglings in Tehran prior to his departure from post in October. Now posted in Vienna, Postl noted that he still advises the Austrian government on Iran issues and that he was recently asked to see if his contacts in Iran would meet with him even though he had departed post. Many said that they would, so he may be asked by the Austrian Foreign Ministry to return to Iran periodically to make use of the excellent contacts he was afforded given his Farsi skills and native Iranian wife.

¶4. (C) Postl recounted his final calls on contacts in Iran before leaving post, noting that many who had refused meetings with him after the elections were now willing to meet him. When he met with former President Khatami, Khatami noted that because of the post-election environment, it did not make sense to talk about politics. Postl suggested that they discuss the possibility of Khatami pursuing a dialogue of civilizations or religions that might give him an opening to the West. Khatami noted that he did want to focus more on that kind of dialogue and engagement and that he might come to Austria next year in pursuit of such discussions.

Final Calls Reveal Disillusionment with the

15. (C) Postl noted that in his final calls, he sought out a meeting with the new health minister, Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi since he was interested in meeting the Islamic Republic's first female minister. Postl described her as "sort of a puppet" and very insecure despite her good credentials for the job. She is a member of the Larijani family, giving this influential clan placement in the executive branch, in addition to the leverage they hold through the key posts of Ali Larijani as Majles Speaker and Javad Larijani as head of the Judiciary. In their meeting, Dastjerdi and Postl discussed possible cooperation between Iran and Austria in hospitals, training, and person-to-person contacts in the medical field.

16. (C) Postl also called on the powerful new chief of President Ahmadinejad's cabinet, Mashaie. Postl said that many believed that Mashaie's rejection for a vice presidential post showed that there were disagreements between Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader, but the fact that he was given the slot as head of the cabinet means that Khamenei must not be fundamentally opposed to him. Postl was candid with Mashaie, noting that although the Iranian elections were an internal matter, the treatment of civilians in the aftermath of the elections was wrong by any calculation. Postl assessed that using Farsi instead of English made a difference in the reaction he received to this candor, and Mashaie said that he would be pleased to meet with Postl again if he were in Iran.

UNVIE VIEN 00000553 002 OF 004

17. (C) In what Postl believes was the first meeting former President Rafsanjani had granted to a Westerner -- and perhaps the first meeting with a foreigner -- since the elections, the two discussed economic cooperation, which Rafsanjani said was his primary focus. They avoided the topics of the election and the nuclear issue, especially given the presence of 10 to 15 "watchers" from different veins of the Iranian government. Rafsanjani was very interested in non-nuclear energy cooperation and asked very detailed questions about wind energy, which Postl said Austria would be able to help with. Rafsanjani also discussed his sense of how the Iranian government could evolve, arguing that change must come from within Iran and that interference from foreigners was not welcome in most circumstances. Nevertheless, Rafsanjani believed that the best help possible from foreigners would be to say that the elections were not fair and to note the human rights violations in the aftermath, though he was not specific about what he thought the influence of such statements would be. Postl noted that recent months clearly had been hard on Rafsanjani; he looked pale and had lost a lot of weight, but his eyes were still "active," according to Postl.

18. (C) Postl described the positions of presidential candidates Karrubi and Musavi as children of the revolution and argued that neither of them wants systemic change. Rather, they hoped to give Iran a "human face." Since the "population of Iran," according to Postl, opposes the Islamic system, the people are not very strongly behind either of these candidates. In closing out his comments on his final meetings in Tehran, Postl noted that after he departed post, his contacts were questioned thoroughly and aggressively, which Postl described as a reality of life in Iran and contact with a Westerner.

Infighting and Confusion Driving
the Nuclear Issue

19. (C) In his discussions at the end of September with Mashaie, Postl encouraged him to ensure that Iran did not

"miss the opportunity" presented by the talks in Geneva. Mashaie responded that Iran would be "sure to take" advantage of this opportunity and told Postl that Postl would be surprised at Iran's approach, that Iran would come with seriousness and an attitude of compromise. Postl's assessment is that Iran decided that this was the right time to show flexibility in order to get an agreement, especially since Ahmadinejad wants to claim responsibility for an agreement with the West. Postl believes that Nuclear Negotiator Jalili came to Geneva with this spirit of compromise and was following direction, presumably from Ahmadinejad. Iran's failure to follow through on these agreements may have been due to a decision by Khamenei either that the West was not trustworthy despite Iran's supposed good intentions or that Iran could get more from the West or P5 plus 1 than was offered in Geneva. Despite the fact that people close to the President say he wants "more," the system gets in the way as do Ahmadinejad's bad advisers. Postl's interlocutors say that if Ahmadinejad alone were to decide about engagement with the West, "things would move more quickly." Postl noted that Khamenei is still respected in Iran and, in his personal opinion, there is no essential divergence between the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad. On issues where the Supreme Leader's opinions were clear, Postl argued that other influential Iranians would not "touch on issues," even to undercut Ahmadinejad. The only way to challenge these leaders was to focus on "unjust" or un-Islamic behavior.

¶10. (C) Postl said that Majles Speaker Larijani probably was not in favor of the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) deal, but when MsnOff questioned whether he really opposed the deal or was responding to the fact that Ahmadinejad came out in favor of the deal, Postl recounted another possibility tied to the post-election environment. Postl noted that he had asked someone close to Larijani whether he was aware of the rapes of election-related prisoners. The interlocutors said that not only was Larijani aware, but all officials were aware of what was going on inside the prison. Nevertheless, when Larijani spoke publicly about the issue, he stated clearly that the rapes are not occurring and thus lost some credibility with the Iranian public. To have not given a more ambiguous response, such as that he would look into the situation, Larijani must have been under strong pressure from above, in Postl's estimation. Given the clarity that what Ahmadinejad had done after the election was wrong and Larijani's distaste for Ahmadinejad, the TRR proposal may have been Larijani's first opportunity to strike back at

UNVIE VIEN 00000553 003 OF 004

Ahmadinejad.

¶11. (C) Postl also noted that Iran probably has whiplash from the international community's response to the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP), which will complicate our efforts to press Iran into compliance with its obligations. Although IAEA Director General ElBaradei said after the first inspection of the FFEP that it was nothing more than "a hole in a mountain," the IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution against Iran, citing the FFEP as one of its main points (ref A). Postl argued that this probably leads Iran to believe that the international community is not serious about the issue, and that, rather, this is "a game."

¶12. (C) One of Postl's contacts close to the Supreme Leader pointed him to a Kayhan article from December 1, written by editor Shariatmadari, which espouses the views of Khamenei on the nuclear issue. The article argues that Iran has gotten nothing from cooperation and should withdraw from the NPT immediately. Since Khamenei has said that he is not opposed to an opening with the U.S., it becomes about Washington presenting the right arguments at the right time. However, Postl said that bringing up the issue of the detained Americans at Geneva probably fell flat with the Iranians. Iranian officials told Postl that they were surprised that American officials raised this issue at those

talks. This was the wrong time to bring up this issue, Postl argued, since these issues are not connected in the minds of the Iranians. (We will explain to the Austrians why this issue is so important and resonates so much to the U.S.) Postl suggested that the UK model was better: when their sailors were captured, UK officials said that this issue had nothing to do with the political problems between the two countries. The dissociation of the issues worked in favor of getting the sailors released. Pressed on when might be such a right time to address the U.S. detainees, Postl suggested that one such way might have been to capitalize on the October 1 Geneva talks by following up quickly with a call from Under Secretary Burns to Jalili "in the spirit of Geneva." During that phone call, Burns could engage Jalili on the detainee issue as an aside. Postl also noted that some of his Iranian government contacts had noted with pleasure the appointment of Ambassador Limbert to deal with the Iranian file given his understanding of Iran.

Postl's Tehran Retrospective

¶13. (C) Looking back on his tenure as Ambassador to Iran, Postl noted that the biggest "game changer" had been this past summer's presidential elections. The events were causing backlash from much of the population. Parents and grandparents were saying, according to Postl, that they do not want their children to be forced to experience the same Iran that they, themselves, have been living under for the last 30 years. For the first time, one can see "kill Khamenei" and "death to Khamenei" scrawled on walls in Tehran. These direct challenges to Khamenei's authority are new and significant. Additionally, Postl expects that the population was disillusioned by the overwhelming fraud in the elections and many will not vote in the future.

¶14. (C) On engagement, Postl suggested that some ways forward for the U.S. and Iran might be to look into using a route from Chah Bahar, on Iran's southern coast, to get U.S. supplies into Afghanistan and using the assumption of office by new IAEA Director General Amano to press for "a new start" on the Additional Protocol and additional transparency measures discussions.

¶15. (C) Postl reiterated his message that Iranian citizens see the Voice of America (VOA) as biased and asked that we not underestimate their frustration. If they see a pervasive media outlet as biased, this presents the U.S. in a negative light and works against U.S. messaging. He said that Iranians currently are faced with two biased choices: VOA and Iranian Broadcasting (IRIB). In response to a MsnOff question about how BBC Persian is perceived, he noted that it is seen as more neutral, but has the stigma of being associated with the UK. Postl floated the idea of U.S. support to Euro News to start broadcasting in Farsi. He also suggested that doing Hardtalk in Persian might be one of the best outlets for U.S. arguments since the format of pitting opposing viewpoints against one another would counteract the perception of bias, but suggested that if our arguments to the Iranian people are not convincing, this quickly would become clear. Finally, Postl noted that the U.S. should not shy away from interviews with Iranian media outlets, suggesting Press TV because it is in English and it is watched in Tehran. A program built

UNVIE VIEN 00000553 004 OF 004

around broadcasting the differing opinions of the U.S., India (because its opinion is well-respected given its influence as a leader in the Nonaligned Movement), and Iran might be a useful way to get our messages across while counteracting perceptions of bias.
DAVIES